

20 OCTOBER 1976

STAT

# Does It Really Matter?

By James Reston

WASHINGTON, Oct. 19—The real scandal of this election so far is the indifference and even cynicism of so many of the American people. On the 200th anniversary of the Declaration of Independence, when there has been so much talk about the glories of the democratic process and the endless struggles for universal suffrage, less than half of the eligible voters are expected to go to the polls on Nov. 2; and the rest are asking: Does it really matter?

The argument in this corner is that it matters very much. As noted before, it matters if the majority of our people, now 28 and under, are left with four more years of the same stodgy government that has eroded their confidence in the American political system. It matters a great deal if the South is rejected once more for the highest office in the land—and this for Gerald Ford!

But especially when the voters are dissatisfied with both Presidential candidates, it also matters—in fact it may be decisive in the next four years—how the Presidential power of appointment is exercised and by whom.

The Presidential elections of 1960 and 1968 dramatize just how much it matters when a sizable proportion of the eligible voters stay home. John Kennedy won over Richard Nixon in '60 by two-tenths of one percent of the vote, and was so shocked that only 65 percent voted that he organized an inquiry to explain the non-voters.

In 1968, Mr. Nixon defeated Hubert Humphrey by seven tenths of one percent of the popular vote—510,645 out of a total of 73 million, with 55 percent voting. So there is an enduring and increasing 15-year trend of indifference here, the consequences of which seem to have been forgotten.

Did it really matter that Richard Nixon, rather than Hubert Humphrey, was in position to choose Spiro Agnew as his Vice President, John Mitchell as his Attorney General, Maurice Stans as his Secretary of Commerce,

Earl Butz as his Secretary of Agriculture, and Messrs. Haldeman, Ehrlichman, Dean and the rest of that gang to staff the White House?

Does it matter that the balance of the Supreme Court has changed in the last seven years of Nixon and Ford appointments from five Democrats and four Republicans to seven Republicans and two Democrats in 1976, and that Mr. Ford, if elected, would have a fairly good chance to appoint two or three more in the coming four years?

This is not to say he has not appointed or retained some good men, for example Henry Kissinger, Attorney General Edward H. Levi, Secretary of Labor John Dunlop—whom he lost—Secretary of Everything Elliot L. Richardson, and Mr. Justice John Paul Stevens of Illinois, his only appointee to the high bench. But it is a spotty and even capricious record.

He had at least three able young potential Vice-Presidential nominees in George Bush of Texas, Donald Rumsfeld of Illinois, and William Ruckelshaus of Indiana, but he suddenly decided to fire his Secretary of Defense, James R. Schlesinger, and his C.I.A. chief, William Colby, and put Rumsfeld and Bush in their jobs where they were unavailable for the Vice-Presidential nomination.

Finally, he allowed the Reagan conservatives to talk him out of Ruckelshaus in favor of Senator Robert Dole of Kansas, whose qualifications for the Senate, let alone the Presidency, are wholly imaginary.

We do not, of course, know how Governor Carter would choose his White House staff, or what sort of appointments he would make to the Cabinet or the Supreme Court, but his careful procedure for choosing a Vice-Presidential running mate is reassuring. Fritz Mondale may not be everybody's favorite Senator, but if you could take a private poll of how the 100 Senators view Mondale's and Dole's qualifications for the Presidency, even Senator Dole might have enough sense of humor to vote against

In this situation, the surprising thing is not that the Republicans are hoping for a low turnout on Election Day—that is their main hope of victory—but that the Democrats, and particularly so many Democratic liberals, are sitting on the side, as they did in '68, complaining that Carter is no Roosevelt.

Even Roosevelt was no Roosevelt in 1932, and somehow Harry Truman managed to overcome the hostility of his own divided party in 1948, but then, as now, the one proposition that cannot be defended is that the choice makes no difference.

"Don't blame me—I'm against both of them," is the latest bumper sticker, and in a way, Ford and Carter have asked for it by ignoring the issues and trying to throw it away on turn-overs. But the vote is not merely for a man but for a Government—four more years of the same or four of at least something newer younger and different—and voter indifference could make all the difference.